

Viktor Yushchenko's presidency takes off

On the first day after his inauguration, president Viktor Yushchenko appointed Yulia Tymoshenko as acting prime minister, and one day later he nominated Petro Poroshenko, who had been the chief pretender to the PM's position, as secretary of the National Security and Defence Council. The composition of the future government is to be made known still this week. Yulia Tymoshenko will make an energetic, decisive and independent PM. As an opponent of the already passed constitutional reform she may strive to have it revised, especially since she is to lose her job as prime minister as of the reform's effective date (i.e. by the beginning of next year). Unlike Tymoshenko, Poroshenko is one of Yushchenko's closest associates, and his strong position is meant to counterbalance Tymoshenko's position and check her excessive ambitions.

Inauguration

On 23rd January Viktor Yushchenko took his oath of office and became the new president of Ukraine. The ceremony in the hall of the Verkhovna Rada featured former presidents Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma, but the former prime minister and Yushchenko's contender Viktor Yanukovych was absent. According to reliable reports, he was in Moscow on that day and may have been received by president Putin. No direct transfer of presidential power took place - Yushchenko accepted the presidential insignia from the Constitutional Court Chairman. Immediately after he was sworn in, the president accepted the government's resignation filed by the acting PM Mykola Azarov, and delivered a short and rather formal address. Subsequently Yushchenko received the oath from the armed forces commanders at the Mariinsky Palace.

One hour later Yushchenko and his family (wife, five children and two grandchildren) arrived in Independence Square where the president delivered his inaugural speech. The most important element in that speech was the resolved assertion that Ukraine's objective was membership in the European Union. Yushchenko also spoke about the great history of Ukraine, albeit he skipped the 20th century, and said that he wanted to be the president of all regions and all citizens, irrespective of language, confession or views. He ended his speech by saying: "Glory to you, glory to each of you, glory to God and glory to Ukraine!" Yushchenko's address was watched by more than half a million people in Independence Square and more than a dozen million on television and the radio.

The day after, shortly before leaving for Moscow, Yushchenko met with the leaders of major Christian denominations in Ukraine at the country's oldest temple, the Sophia church (it is a museum building owned by the state). The meeting was joined by the leader of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchy, which had been the only major denomination to support Yanukovych. Immediately before his departure, already at the airport, Yushchenko appointed key state officials. In Moscow he met both president Vladimir Putin (these talks are discussed in a separate paper), and the Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and all Russia.

Yulia Tymoshenko's appointment

Contrary to expectations, Yulia Tymoshenko was not presented to the Verkhovna Rada as a candidate for the prime minister's job, but immediately nominated as acting government chief (the Parliament is to gather for the spring session only on 1st February). This means that Yushchenko does not trust the original cabinet and Azarov in particular.

The appointment of Y. Tymoshenko as prime minister had been provided for in the coalition agreement, but the people around Yushchenko were involved in a serious dispute concerning the PM's job. Petro Poroshenko aspired to be prime minister, and other candidates were also considered. After long hesitation, Yushchenko chose Tymoshenko, and Poroshenko was entrusted with another key state position. Yulia Tymoshenko probably will get the endorsement of a majority of deputies, though the majority will be rather narrow.

As former deputy prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko is better prepared than anyone else in Yushchenko's milieu to be prime minister. In that former role in 2000 she was so resolved and efficient that she was dubbed the "Iron Yulia". She was also one of the chief leaders of the "orange revolution", which made her immensely popular. On the other hand, she has descended from the oligarchic community of Dnipropetrovsk, knows the oligarchic business first hand, and knows how to talk to its representatives. Yushchenko can expect her to govern energetically and efficiently, and, perhaps more importantly, to skilfully represent even the smallest successes to the public opinion as triumphs of the new authorities, and to conceal major failings. The latter is particularly important in the context of the campaign for the parliamentary election of March 2006, which is beginning already.

A government led by Tymoshenko will be much more independent from the president than a cabinet headed by, for example, Petro Poroshenko could be. It remains to be seen whether Yulia Tymoshenko will work to the benefit of the entire coalition backing Yushchenko, or just her own party.

Remodelling of the president's apparatus

President Yushchenko has dissolved the Presidential Administration. He has appointed Oleksandr Zinchenko as the secretary of state and charged him with the task of organising the President's Secretariat. Petro Poroshenko was appointed secretary of the National Security and Defence Council (RNBO). Both appointments suggest that serious changes to the functioning of central state bodies in Ukraine are underway.

The Presidential Administration was an unconstitutional body, which under Viktor Medvedchuk became a kind of super-government and was generally criticised, if not hated. It included an extensive structure comprising advisory and analytic bodies, most of which will probably be preserved. For the time being the shape of the projected President's Secretariat (Office) remains unclear, and in particular, it remains to be seen to what extent its chief will make the president accessible to various politicians and analytic institutes (Medvedchuk had completely monopolised access to the president). However, even if Zinchenko tries to block such access, the strong position of the RNBO secretary will help create a more balanced "information environment" for the president.

The National Security and Defence Council comprises the highest-ranking state officials, led by the president in his official capacity. The constitution gives the Council "co-ordination and control" powers in the area of the state's security and defence. The extensive apparatus of the Council is chaired by its secretary. Yushchenko has made it clear that the Council, until now a body of secondary importance, will play a more prominent role. When the constitutional amendments become effective, the Council, or more precisely its apparatus, will be the main tool for the president to influence the affairs of the state. The appointment of Poroshenko, a politician but also a major entrepreneur, as the Council's secretary, suggests that the Council will now exercise more control over economic processes.

The problem of parliamentary representation

Our Ukraine and its allies do not have a majority in the Verkhovna Rada, which substantially curbs their ability to carry through reform-oriented bills. Yushchenko will need the support of opposition clubs, most probably the centrist bloc now forming under the auspices of the Parliament speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn who is being joined by more and more deputies from the original pro-government majority. Such support, however, will be provided for a price.

On the one hand, one could expect that the new opposition factions (except for the communists) will shrink, and some of their members may even join Our Ukraine. On the other hand, however, the club of Our Ukraine will also be weakened substantially in the coming weeks. The constitution of Ukraine does not allow a person to combine a parliamentary mandate with any function whatsoever in the executive, including that of a minister. Yushchenko has already relinquished his mandate, and Tymoshenko, Poroshenko, Zinchenko and all other MPs appointed to governmental positions, nominated as regional administration chiefs, etc., will have to do it in the coming days. This group comprises Our Ukraine's leading representatives.

Mandates of MPs elected in proportionate vote will be taken over by the candidates next-in-line in the lists of Our Ukraine or Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc. These, however, are mostly politicians of inferior rank, deliberately placed in "no mandate positions" in the lists. In those cases where mandates are vacated by MPs elected in majority vote (as in the case of Poroshenko), supplementary elections will be held, in which candidates of Our Ukraine may well be the winners, but there is no certainty about it.

As an even more important problem, Our Ukraine will lose influence on the leadership of numerous parliament commissions, including the Budget Commission, until now led by Poroshenko. Leading positions in those commissions were appointed in line with the principle of having chair from the coalition and deputy chair from the opposition, or the other way round, and the Verkhovna Rada has ruled recently that no changes to the commissions' leadership may be introduced before the end of term. This means, for example, that Poroshenko may be replaced now by Valeriy Konovaluk, member of the "Donetsk" Party of Regions.

Finally, Zinchenko's departure from the Verkhovna Rada creates the problem of supplementing the composition of the presidium. Heated controversy is expected here, because Zinchenko was appointed as deputy speaker of Parliament as a representative of the SDPU(u) and his original party will strive to put its own candidate in his position, while Our Ukraine will try to get a representative of its own to the presidium.